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## Literature of the New Year: Literary Variations on the Celebration of the New Year

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### Abstract

Is the New Year really new or old? Happy or sad? Is it only part of the process and the cycle of seasons making one look back and think of death? Is it a time to wish to stay where one is or hope for opportunities and possibilities? Like a point in a circle, is every day a New Year's day? Is it a time for nostalgia and reminiscence or promises and resolutions for the future? With the (Gregorian and the British Government) changes in the Western calendar at different times in history and with different countries/cultures celebrating the New Year at different times of the year and with the fiscal year, political (election) year, and academic year being different from the traditional New Year of January 1st, does the New Year mark the beginning and the ending in just an arbitrary way? Centuries ago Britain's earliest Poets Laureate introduced the tradition of writing a New Year poem. Since then there have been many authors writing New Year essays and poems. They include Robert Herrick, Charles Cotton, Johann Von Goethe, S. T. Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Lord Alfred Tennyson, William Cullen Bryant, Helen Hunt Jackson, Emily

Dickinson, George Curtis, Thomas Hardy, Fiona Macleod (William Sharp), D. H. Lawrence, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sylvia Plath, among others.

Ancient Babylonians/Mesopotamians of the time of the famous king and lawgiver Hammurabi, in what is now modern Iraq, started marking the New Year 2000 years Before (Jesus) Christ (BC). Each year they used to observe the New Year for as many as eleven days to worship the sun-god Akito and at the same time to please other smaller/lesser gods as well for the purpose of agricultural fertility and favorable sunny weather. According to the Hebrew calendar, Babylonian New year fell in March/April, on the vernal equinox, when the day and the night were exactly equal. Later, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Romans celebrated the festival of Saturnalia in honor of the god Saturn on 17-23 December when they prayed to the two-headed god Janus (from whom the name of the month of January derived).

Janus had two faces, front and back, enabling him to see both the past and the present or future, so he was considered the god of the “beginnings, gates, transitions, time, doorways, passages, and endings.” The word calendar comes from the Roman *kallends*, which means the beginning of a month. Roman Saturnalia ultimately led to Christmas, from Christ, a Latinized term for the Cross of what the Christians believe to be Jesus’s sacrificial crucifixion.

It used to be 304 days in a year when, from 46 BC, started the Julian calendar of 365 days a year introduced by the Roman general and emperor Julius Caesar, who added a day to February every four years, thereby calling every fourth year a leap year. Emperor Constantine I, in early 4th Century AD, introduced the 7-day week with Sunday as the first day of the week. Previously, it was an eight-day week followed by a market day.

There are many New Years throughout the world: Western January 1<sup>st</sup>; Celtic Samhain, meaning “Summer’s End” on the eve of 31 October<sup>1</sup>; Arabic Muharram 1st (which being lunar-based comes ahead by a week or so every year on the solar-based Western calendar); Jewish Rosh Hashanah, meaning “head of the year,” that is, the first day of the month of Tishri on the Jewish calendar<sup>2</sup>; Iranian/Persian Nowruz, which means the New Day (first day of spring) and which roughly coincides with March 21<sup>st</sup>; Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, that falls between 21 January and 20 February, and the Bengali New Year or *Pohela Boishakh*, which according to the Indian solar calendar falls on 14 April.

All these dates were affected by Pope Gregory XIII when he corrected the errors of the Julian calendar, named after Julius Caesar, as mentioned above. The latter gave a few minutes extra to the year. This extra time kept accumulating so that by the 16th century there was a difference of 10 days between the New Year and the natural or seasonal cycle of the year. With the help of the astronomers’ calculation, Gregory ordered, in 1582, that throughout the Catholic world the 4<sup>th</sup> October would be followed by the 15th October. Protestant England, having led the opposition to Roman Catholicism, was hesitant for about two hundred years and then accepted the Gregorian calendar in 1752. However, England then cut another 11 days in September to bring the New Year and the season in accord. Thus 21 days had to be retrenched, giving the

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<sup>1</sup> “Christianity found that a number of Celtic customs were compatible with their religion and hence adopted them. The Church adopted Samhain as the Feast of All Saints or Hallow Tide and Oidhche Shamhna became Halloween.”

<sup>2</sup> Visit <http://www.indobase.com/holidays/new-year/newyear-in-different-religions/>; Theodor H. Gaster, *New Year: its history, customs, and superstitions* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1955). Like the Christian and the Celtic customs, there are similarities between the Arabic and the Jewish ones, too. The Jewish calendar, like the Arabic calendar, is based on the moon cycles, not the sun cycles. Both Arabic and Jewish New Years coincide and are compatible with each other, coming about the same time. Both Islam and Judaism being monotheistic and sharing similar religious history and beliefs, both the tenth of Muharram (*Ashura*) and the tenth of Tishri (*Yom Kippur*) are profoundly holy to Muslims and Jews respectively with many religious events from time immemorial believed to have occurred on this tenth, so that both communities fast the whole day on the day, with Muslims actually preferring to fast two days, either Muharram 9 and 10 or 10 and 11 because of the problems connected with moon sighting and also to differentiate their practice from the Jews. It is to be mentioned here that “The Hebrew calendar is a luni-solar calendar, meaning that months are based on lunar months, but years are based on solar years,” starting from the Passover that commemorates the Exodus of the people of Israel from ancient Egypt, so that the Gregorian/Christian 2015-16 coincides with the Hebrew 5776.

impression of doubt or arbitrariness about the exact beginning of the New Year as mentioned above and below (by George William Curtis in his essay).

Let us proceed, however, by taking the widely celebrated January 1<sup>st</sup> for granted as the conventional beginning of the New Year that globally shapes and formats the lives and affairs of the humankind worldwide. There are countless poems and essays written in bidding farewell to the old year and welcoming the new.<sup>3</sup> If the anonymous medieval classic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an example, Christmas and the New Year do not just mean feasting, drinking and welcoming the new as routine but also meeting the weird, marvelous, supernatural and dangerous challenges, of course, in a noble and chivalrous manner. By contrast, seventeenth century English poet Robert Herrick sends as his New Year's gift to an aristocrat (in his poem "A New Year's Gift, sent to Sir Simeon Steward") not a big news of national importance, good or bad, but a reminder of the simple local sports and the homely joys of meat, wine, and "plenteous harvest" that a common man in a small town or the countryside can enjoy with his family and friends during a peaceful year. Details of Herrick's New Year's gift include "a jolly"

Verse crown'd with ivy and with holly;  
That tells of winter's tales and mirth  
That milk-maids make about the hearth;  
Of Christmas sports, the wassail-bowl,  
That toss'd up, after Fox-i'-th'-hole;  
Of Blind-man-buff, and of the care  
That young men have to show the Mare;  
Of twelfth-tide cakes, of peas and beans,  
Wherewith ye make those merry scenes,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://poetry.about.com/od/ourpoemcollections/a/newyearpoems.htm>

When as ye choose your king and queen,  
And cry out, 'Hey for our town green!' –

On a very generalized note, Herrick's younger contemporary Charles Cotton tells us about the New Year's fear of "direst mischiefs" as well as its "superexcellently good" fortunes through the appearance of the two-faced Janus, the ancient Roman god of beginnings and transitions, from whose name the month of January is traditionally thought to derive. Cotton, a "heartly and cheerful" man, as Charles Lamb calls him in his New Year's Eve essay (see below), ends his poem "The New Year" with a note of hope and optimism saying one good year in three is enough to welcome a new year and be happy.

What Herrick does not want on his New Year's gift list is the news of the momentous political events of the time. He does not mention what they are but they could probably be the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the Gun Powder Plot. These may very well be some of what Cotton refers to as the "direst mischiefs" or "superexcellently good" fortunes, national or individual. Herrick begins with what would be out of his list:

No news of navies burnt at seas;  
No noise of late spawned tittyrises;  
  
No closet plot or open vent,  
That frights men with a Parliament:  
No new device or late-found trick,  
To read by the stars the kingdom's sick;  
No gin to catch the State, or wring

The free-born nostril of the King,  
We send to you...

Centuries ago Britain's Poet Laureate introduced the tradition of writing a New Year poem. Laureate Nahum Tate established this practice, having written many New Year odes during his laureateship lasting for 23 years, starting from 1693, and being successively confirmed by three monarchs. Apart from the obligatory New Year and Birthday Odes and poems on the death of Queen Mary and Queen Anne, Tate in his Laureate position wrote poems on the English victories by sea and land.<sup>4</sup>

It is exactly the similar national and international affairs moving and shaking the world at the time of the French Revolution that are referred to in *Ode to the Departing Year* (1796) by

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<sup>4</sup> In classical times, poets were crowned with a laurel wreath (emblems of a poet). The Italian Francis Petrarch (1304-74) contrived to have himself crowned "poet laureate." Chaucer's Clerk refers to Petrarch as "lauriat poete" in *The Clerk's Tale*, which is based on Petrarch's Latin version of the last tale of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. There is the poet Cuddie in Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (tenth eclogue/October), which deals with the place of poetry and the responsibility of the poet in the world, an important theme throughout much of Spenser's work. Although there is no formal job description, it is understood that poets laureate are required to write verses about the royal family and on grand national and ceremonial occasions. The job of the poet laureate (the monarch's pensioned poet) has in the past been a lifetime appointment with an annual honorarium of £100 a year, but in a departure from custom, Britain has recently said that the appointment, starting from Andrew Motion, would be for 10 years and that there would be an annual payment of £5000. The appointment is approved by the queen but chosen from a short list by the British Prime Minister. British poets laureate include John Skelton, who was the major poet of the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the title of poet laureate from both Oxford and Cambridge. In 1616 Ben Jonson was appointed poet laureate with a pension of a handsome amount, the first such appointment in English literary history. He rose from humble beginnings to become England's unofficial poet laureate with a substantial pension from the king and honorary degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. William Davenant was poet laureate from 1637-1650 (then not knighted). John Dryden held the title for twenty years until 1670 when he was deprived of it by the Catholic James II for his earlier allegiance to James's Stuart brother Charles II at the Restoration. There were Thomas Shadwell, until his death in 1692; Nahum Tate, 1693 to 1715; Thomas Warton the Younger, 1785-1790; H. J. Pye, from 1790; Robert Southey, 1831-to his death in 1843; Wordsworth, 1843 to his death in 1850; Tennyson, 1850-1892; (no new poet-laureate was appointed for four years after Tennyson's death); Alfred Austin, 1896-1912; Robert Bridges, 1913-1930; C. Day-Lewis, John Masefield, John Betjeman, Ted Hughes (from 1985), Andrew Motion, 1999-2009, and Carol Ann Duffy. Thomas Gray declined the offer of poet laureate in 1757; Walter Scott was offered the honor in 1813 but he declined and recommended Southey; Samuel Rogers, William Morris, and Rudyard Kipling refused. The American poet laureate position was established by an act of Congress in 1985. Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wilbur, Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, Robert Pinsky, and Rita Dove were among the American poets laureate.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is to be noted that Coleridge's Ode is on/to the departing year (not on the New Year), when he had still been in favor of France, before he turned against France for its aggression against other countries and its threat of invasion against England looming large. Together with the patriotic *Fears in Solitude*, the immediately following *France: An Ode* (April 1798) is in fact a recantation or palinodia as Coleridge called it expressing the withdrawal of his support from France. In *Ode to the Departing Year*, Coleridge focuses on the political developments, especially the death of Catherine of Russia, that were internationally disconcerting. Detesting his own England with pain and anguish, he makes a prophesy that Britain would fall if it entered an alliance with the tyrant Russia against what he then thought was still a promising revolutionary France. As in Herrick's poem, Coleridge's Ode ends with a recommendation for a simple life of hard work as a farmer in an agrarian setting close to soil—a recommendation that Coleridge was planning to translate into action as he was moving from Bristol to Nether Stowey, Somerset, in South West England with the intention of becoming a farmer himself.

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Coleridge's *Ode to the Departing Year* is quoted from by his friend Charles Lamb in his essay "New Year's Eve," published in the January 1821 issue of *The London Magazine*. Author of *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) and *The Essays of Elia* (1823), Lamb was an accountant in India House in London for more than 30 years. Among his friends were Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and Coleridge. His life was marked by tragedy and mental derangement. Never married (his affair with Ann Simmons came to nothing, which, according to E. V. Lucas, may have caused his short confinement in a mental asylum), Lamb was a caregiver for his sister Mary, who also used to suffer from insanity, more than him. In a fit of mania, she had stabbed their mother to



death in 1796 but was spared imprisonment in view of her being mentally and psychologically disturbed. She was in and out of psychiatric facilities throughout her life.

Anyway, one of the great masters of the English essay and one of the most personal and intimate of the early 19th-century English essayists, Lamb's New Year's Eve essay is perhaps the most famous of its kind. In the essay, he reflects wistfully about the passage of time. Unlike those who look forward to the New Year, Lamb enjoys reminiscing about the past and staying at his present age of forty five. Desiring to live with his books ("my midnight darlings") and familiar surroundings, he wishes neither to get older or younger nor to die:

I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived; I and my friends: to be no younger, no richer, no handsomer. I do not want to be weaned by age; or drop, like mellow fruit ... into the grave. Any alteration on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging puzzles and discomposes me. My household-gods plant a terrible fixed foot, and are not rooted up without blood. They do not willingly seek Lavinian shores. A new state of being staggers me.

The sound of bells that says goodbye to the Old Year is "the most solemn and touching" to Lamb. This sound, nearest to heaven, makes him recall what has happened to him during the last twelve months. He breaks with his elders who observed the New Year according to old customs, rituals, and institutions. Unlike them, who rang out the Old Year with "ceremony" and "hilarity," the sound of the farewell midnight chimes always brings "a train of pensive imagery into his fancy." It is as if this were "a reckoning" for him.

From childhood till the age of thirty, a man is not concerned about his or human mortality. Although he may be aware of the fragility of life, he as a young man does not bring this awareness "home to himself." Lamb illustrates this with the analogy that although one

knows about the shivering cold of winter, one can hardly appropriate it to his imagination in the hot June. However, as one grows older, one feels “these audits but too powerfully,” counting every moment of life “like miser’s farthings” but still failing to stop the unstoppable and that is the movement of “the great wheel” of time or the biblical “weaver’s shuttle.” Lamb’s insight here anticipates what Thomas Hardy has to say in “At the Entering of the New Year,” a poem Hardy wrote at the age of eighty in 1920, that when we are young we are not concerned about the passing of time because we know that there is always the new to come in and be celebrated, but when we are old we stem the tide of time as we then try to cling to the old as much as we can.

Lamb finds no solace in the “great wheel” and “weaver’s shuttle” metaphors. He dismisses these as not “sweetening the unpalatable draught of mortality.” He does not want “to be carried with the tide,” even though that might “smoothly bear human life to eternity.” He is reluctant at “the course of destiny,” however inevitable that is. He wishes to defy the tide of time and does not want to submit to the inevitability of death because, in keeping with the Romantic environmental and ecological tradition, he says:

I am in love with this green earth; the face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets ... Sun, and sky, and breeze, and solitary walks, and summer holidays, and the greenness of fields, and the delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light, and fire-side conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests, and *irony itself*--do these things go out with life?

Like the opening sentences of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, Lamb begins with one of the most famous and aphoristic openings in English prose—fictional or nonfictional. In contrast with the rest of the essay—intimate, playful, queer,

quirky, wry, whimsical, archaic, pointed, and protean, as characterized by David Lazar—its beginning is less intimate, more formal and public, written in plain and simple English.<sup>5</sup> The very opening remark stresses the importance and lasting memorability of the New Year more than one's own birthday, which over time either lapses into disuse or loses its charm and significance:

Every man hath two birth-days: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration. The one is that which in an special manner he terms *his*. In the gradual disuse of old observances, this custom of solemnizing our proper birth-day hath nearly passed away, or is left to children, who reflect nothing at all about the matter, nor understand anything in it beyond cake and orange. But the birth of a New Year is of an interest too wide to be pretermitted by king or cobbler. No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.

On the New Year's eve, Lamb reminisces about his love saying he thinks it is better that he spent seven years of his prime languishing over--and being captivated by--the beauty of Ann Simmons, the relationship, however, never ending in marriage, than to have never experienced such a devoted and truly loving relationship:

Methinks, it is better that I should have pined away seven of my goldenest years, when I was thrall to the fair hair and fairer eyes of [Ann Simmons] than that so passionate a love-adventure should be lost.

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<sup>5</sup> David Lazar, "Reading 'New Year's Eve,'" in *Understanding the Essay*, eds. Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 206-217.

Lamb anticipates Tennyson, who says, in *In Memoriam* (1850), that “’Tis better to have loved and lost/Than never to have loved at all.” Similarly, he reflects about the financial inheritance from his father’s will of which he has been cheated by one wicked William Dorrell, who was a witness to the will. Unlike his love affair, he thinks it would have been better for him to have missed the whole legacy and be without the idea of “that specious old rogue” than to have possessed a certain sum of money at present and suffer from the thought of being deprived.

Being without a wife or family, Lamb speculates that he cannot get out of himself, having thus developed the habit of turning back upon memory. He portrays himself as a man of “introspection,” “retrospection,” “self-love,” “sickly idiosyncrasy,” and self-ridicule but “impenetrable to ridicule” by others and beyond the sympathy of others. It is through “the phantom cloud” of Elia, his pseudonym after an Italian clerk, described as “a stammering buffoon,” “a stupid changeling,” that he has developed his persona. Lamb, in the guise of Elia, has finally evolved into a being of hope, honesty, courage, and imagination.

The New Year falls in winter, when nature is generally dead and which puts Lamb back in the contemplation mode about the correlation between him and nature. Lamb hates winter because it is in the cold, numbing winter that his thoughts of death--his “intolerable disinclination to dying”-- return to haunt and beset him most. Winter blast “nips and shrinks” him. Like a snake which goes into hibernation in winter and comes back to activity in the summer, Lamb also enjoys a feeling of immortality in the summer as if death would not come to him then. By the same logic, he likes the sun (Phoebus/Apollo) and the light, warmth and vitality associated with it but he turns away from the moon (Diana/Artemis) and moonlight, which with their “shadowy and spectral appearances” (by way of a response to Coleridge’s *Ancient*

*Mariner?*), he thinks, are associated with cold and darkness. The moon is “the cold ghost of the sun, or Phoebus' sickly sister.”

Lamb wants to continue an active and enjoyable life; he is not one of those who are indifferent to life and who welcome death “as a port of refuge and speak of the grave as of some soft arms, in which they may slumber as on a pillow.” He shuns and proscribes death as a “foul, ugly phantom” and “a universal viper,” to be detested, abhorred, and execrated. He also describes death as a “thin, melancholy *Privation*, or more frightful and confounding *Positive!*” that is only evil. He has a disgust at the “impertinent and misbecoming” tombstone inscriptions, which are no more than “frigid and insulting” antidotes against the fear of death. Patrick Madden finds Lamb's New Year's Eve “a perfect essay,”

which in a spill of language and punctuation turns an occasion into a meditation, in this case on mortality, that inexhaustible topic and perennial favorite of writers from all ages. I love it for how it hooks not just my gut but my mind, not with drama or story but with idea, and because at nearly 200 years old, it still speaks to a universal feeling sparked by the arbitrary turning of the calendar leaf. Also because it reminds me, as any *memento mori* should, that I will die.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of the essay, Lamb moves from pondering over love, inheritance, and mortality to the state of feeling like a jolly man, alive and well, drinking happy drinks. His progress from emotional hurt to promise is like the midnight church bells, which, as a turncoat does, change their notes from mournful chanting about the departed year to “lustily” ringing in its successor—the New Year. Lamb quotes the poem by Cotton in full, which follows the same

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.essaydaily.org/2012/12/dec-31-patrick-madden-on-charles-lambs.html>

pattern, from hinting at the tormenting mischiefs and daily ills to welcoming the New Year with robust hopefulness. As he turns around, Lamb feels fortified as if he has drunk a comforting and pleasant-tasting drink that expands the heart and produces “sweet blood” (in contrast with the aching and numbing drink Keats drinks in the Nightingale Ode). He feels relieved (“washed,” “cleansed” and “generous”) by “the purging sunlight of clear poetry,” referring to Cotton’s cavalier poem and its smacking of “the magnanimity of the old English vein.” With the reading of the poem by Cotton, “those puling fears of death” are gone like a cloud, finally making him wish many merry New Years to all.

Lamb reemploys, Gerald Monsman argues, Cotton’s “mythological personification of the two-faced Janus as an emblem of Romantic synthesis...As he warms with the delight of old poetry and the companionship of friends, Lamb is able to welcome the New Year with newfound self-esteem.”<sup>7</sup> Lazar comments on Lamb’s embracing of life in the end saying that his rebound from remorse and regret to promise, from pain to pleasure is funny, delightful and amusing. This transformation follows an alternating pattern of self-mocking, self-knowing, self-critical and self-comforting moments.

George William Curtis’s New Year (January 1887) essay is perhaps the cutest and most accessible essay on the topic. It begins with a reference to Lamb’s opening statement quoted above, that no one ever regarded the first of January with indifference. Regardless of how routine and punctual is the matter of the New Year and how no one had paid attention to it before Pope Gregory XIII and the British Parliament revised the Western calendar, there cannot be any loss of “the charm of regularly recurring times and seasons.” Curtis goes on to say:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-188997958/charles-lamb-as-the-janus-of-romanticism-in-new-year-s>

Any day in any month, actually begins a new year, but that does not give to that date the significance and the feeling of the first of January. That is our day of remembrance, our feast of hope, the first page of our fresh calendar of good resolutions, the day of underscoring and emphasis of the swift lapse of life.

Curtis argues that the problems of white hairs, wrinkles, baldness, and eyesight are not necessarily marks of old age because they come to different people at different times, starting from young age. So it should not matter if one is at the threshold of fifty, sixty, or seventy. He says:

Since, then, we cannot stop the flight of Time, let him pass. But he must not calumniate [make false or defamatory statements] as he passes. He must not be allowed to stigmatize vigor and health and freshness of feeling and the young heart and the agile foot as old merely because of a certain number of years. This is the season of good resolutions. The new year begins in a snow-storm of white vows. So be it. But let our whitest vow be, after that for a whiter life, that age shall no longer be measured by this arbitrary standard of years, and that those deceitful and practical octogenarians of thirty shall not escape as young merely because they have not yet shown the strength to carry threescore and ten with jocund elasticity.

Fiona Macleod is the female pseudonym of the Scottish nature writer William Sharp. His beautiful, environmentally-aware "At the Turn of the Year," one of a/its kind, appeared in his collection of nature writings called *Where the Forest Murmurs* (1906). Reminding us of Lamb's love of his green surroundings, Macleod's ecologically more elaborate "green" and modern essay argues that nature never dies, not even in the deep, dead, and bleak December/January

winter with its rains and storms. Nature continues to live in the form of “the coppice or by the stream-side, by the field-thicket, in the glens,” and even on the wide moors under the “dense and wide” coverlet of sleet and snow. By no means nature can be thought of as lifeless at this season. There are winter plants, worms, insects, birds, and field-travellers, such as the “resident and immigrant” larks,

the wandering thrushes; the vagrant rooks, the barn-haunting hoodie; the yellow-hammer flocks and the tribes of the finch; the ample riverside life, where heron and snipe, mallard and moor-hen, wren and kingfisher, and even plover and the everywhere adaptable starling are to be found with ease by quick eyes and careful ears [...] the sudden apparition of the bat, or the columnar dance of the ephemeridae [mayflies], or the flight of the winter-moth along the disheveled hedgerows [...] the mistletoe and the ivy, the holly and the fir, the box and the late-flowering clematis, and many other of the green and flowering clans of the forest and the garden [...] the midwinter-blooming [wild flower called] shepherd's purse, healing groundsel, bright chickweed, and red deadnettle [...] the dun-hued lapwing [...] the inland-wandering gull [...].

Drawing an analogy of continuity with the one king dead and the incoming king wished to live long, Macleod asserts that “There is no interregnum” in nature, too. He is “a watcher of the multiform birdlife” of the “winter-fields and fallow lands” of Scotland, one who knows that “the same drama of life and death is enacted in midwinter as in midspring or midsummer, a drama only less crowded, less complex and less obvious, but not less continual, not less vital for the actors.” Scottish landscape being the center of his attention, Macleod describes the impact of nature on it from all directions. He says that after the spring and summer cuckoos, swallows,



landrails, and swans are gone by November by the effect of “the wet winds of the *west* and the freezing blasts of the *north*,” “ten thousand wings” as “the migrants from overseas descend at last on our English and Scottish shores,” starting from the autumn. A “myriad host,” swept away, is replaced by “an incalculable host” due to “those *east* winds from Norway and the Baltic, from Jutland and Friesland, [...] those *south* winds leaping upward from the marshes of Picardy and the Breton heathlands and from all of the swarm-delivering South behind, [...] those *southwest* gales warm with the soft air of the isles of the west, and wet with the foam over lost Ys and sunken Lyonesse.”

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Turning to New Year poetry, Johann Von Goethe wishes to forget the woe and anguish of the old year while expressing his zest and zeal for life, living every moment happily and rapturously in the company of friends during a merry New Year’s party at his home in 1802. At the juncture of the departing and starting years, he recalls the cherished memories of the past moments but he also sees the future moments of joy and happiness at the change of the direction of the mysterious fate and fortune. It is both the prospects and problems and the prosperities and challenges that are suggested in his New Year’s thoughts and prayers:

Guide thro’ life’s mazy

Pathways so hazy

Into the year!

The occasion of Tennyson’s musical “Ring out, wild bells” is the New Year’s Eve of 1835 and then it was included in his elegiac masterpiece *In Memoriam* (1850). Like his widely known social and public voice in the context of the increasingly industrial and materialistic age,

this song also is a generalized goodbye to all that is old and bad for the society and a hearty welcome to whatever is new and good for humankind:

Ring out the old, ring in the new,...  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.  
Ring out the grief that saps the mind, ...  
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,  
Ring in redress to all mankind.  
Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife;  
Ring in the nobler modes of life,  
With sweeter manners, purer laws.  
Ring out the want, the care, the sin,...  
Ring out, ring out thy mournful rhymes,  
But ring the fuller minstrel in.  
Ring out false pride in place and blood,  
The civic slander and the spite;  
Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good.  
Ring out old shapes of foul disease,  
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;  
Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace.  
Ring in the valiant man and free,

The larger heart the kindlier hand;  
Ring out the darkness of the land,  
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Tennyson's "The Death of the Old Year," written in 1842, is completely different from his above poem. While in "Ring out, wild bells," he gives an impatient farewell to the old year and a fervent welcome to the New, "The Death of the Old Year" is a midnight lament for the old, which the poet does not want to die: "You came to us so readily/ You lived with us so steadily/ Old year you shall not die/ ... A jollier year we shall not see/...We did so laugh and cry with you." It was full of "joke and jest." Personified as a male friend, about to die by midnight and then dead at midnight and be shaken hands with before parting through dying, Tennyson personalizes "him" saying the old year was "a friend to me ... He gave me a friend and a true truelove," which the New Year, though "blithe and bold," will take away. The New Year is described as the old year's "son and heir," who steps in to take the place of the outgoing in the form of a corpse.

This is almost Dickinsonian. It is a characteristic of Emily Dickinson to give human qualities and attributes to nonhuman (animate or non-animate) objects and beings exactly as Tennyson does in his poem. She takes the opportunity of remembering her father's death a year prior in her "One Year Ago," written in memory of him and how graceful and glorious he was. Now that she is also old enough to die and so to wish for only one or still many more birthdays, she remembers her times with her father when she was young. Dickinson is, however, famous for her informal, conversational, and colloquial style, leaving more unsaid than said by means of her frequently used dashes, as Tennyson is, by contrast, for his smooth, rhythmic and musical style.

It is the similar materialistic and scientific 19<sup>th</sup> century, torn between faith and doubt, that has become a “century’s corpse” and is being given a dull and mute farewell by the pessimistic Hardy in his “The Darkling Thrush,” one of his most lyrical and anthologized poems:

The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervorless as I.

Probably written in the evening of December 31<sup>st</sup>, the poem was originally called "The Century's End, 1900".<sup>8</sup> It describes the last century as “bleak” and “broken,” “cryptic” and “cloudy,” and “frosty” and “specter-grey” as the December winter is. However, there is a hope with the “ecstatic” singing of a thrush, a Keatsian nightingale-like image:

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

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<sup>8</sup> "A deleted 1899 on the manuscript suggested he had written it a year before," Claire Tomalin tells us in her biography of Hardy, *Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man* (Viking Penguin, 2006).

Again, like Keats in “Ode to a Nightingale,” Hardy is ambivalent and equivocal with the sense of joy being undercut because he hardly finds any cause in nature for the thrush to be so hopeful, yet he thinks, there may have “trembled through”

His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

Hardy’s second New Year poem, “New Year’s Eve,” was written in 1906 when he was about to be seventy. It is in the form of a philosophical or metaphysical dialogue between the poetic persona (of the agnostic Hardy) and God about the logic behind the creation of the earth from “formless void,” an earth full of human suffering. God’s reply is that it is for the humans not to see “the shortness of God’s view” but to apply their reasons, their perceiving consciousness, as opposed to their sensory perceptions, to explain God’s apparently “logicless” creation in an “unweeting” (unwitting or unknowing) way.

Hardy’s third poem, “At the Entering of the New Year,” was written on December 31, during the First World War (1914-1918), when he was approaching eighty years of age. The poem is about the changing human attitude toward the New Year over the course of time from youth to old age. He says that while in youth he was careless about the passing of time, he was excited welcoming the New Year. In his older years he experienced the losses of the First World War and so was attempting to stall the speed of time so that the memory of human cost and human heroism stayed longer with him, without letting it lapse into oblivion. At the beginning, WWI was full of high hopes about military and patriotic glory, but it proved to be shattering, full

of prolonged violence and bloodshed that deeply impacted the psyche of the European younger generation.

However, the poem is not without its share of ambiguity and ambivalence, characteristic of Hardy. The first part, introduced as “old style” and given in the past tense, describes the warm indoor celebration of the New Year by the young, whose songs and dances contrast with the cold and lonely darkness outside. Their throbbing delight is arousing to “home-gone husbandmen,” “the white highway,” “nighted farers,” “shepherds at their midnight lambings,” and “stealthy poachers.” The youthful singing and dancing indoors is forgetful about the death and destruction writ large in the change of time:

As Time unrobed the Youth of Promise

Hailed by our sanguine sight.

Part II, in turn, is introduced as “new style” and is given in the simple present indefinite. It takes place in the evening, outside, when the tolling bells are “muffled” in the breeze. A “mantled ghost” seems to represent the “bereaved Humanity” in the context of the human suffering of WWI. It seeks to stop the “imminent,” “mystic” New Year from coming: “Thy entrance here is undesired.” Yet the New Year is addressed as “Calm comely Youth, untasked, untired,” around which the “stars irradiate.” Age wants the old time to delay its departure, yet it cannot wait to share in the appeal and excitement of the new:

Must we avow what we would close confine?

With thee, good friend, we would have converse none,

Albeit the fault may not be thine.

Age may lament the ravages of time, but it cannot completely turn its back on the charm of the fresh start of a New Year. Similarly, just as the early enthusiasm for the glory of war tended to sideline the suffering and death it would inevitably bring, the slowly but surely surfacing war weariness and resistance to war could not hide the admiration for the courage and valor of the battlefield. Hardy's "At the Entering of the New Year" looks back and looks forward to all the war memories in history—ancient or modern, colonial or postcolonial, especially on the Veterans (or Remembrance) Day that is observed around the world on November 11 to honor the fallen and the wounded or all men and women that served in the military. Hardy's poem no doubt reflects what many try to balance that day: honoring the veterans while remembering the losses caused by war. As Judy Foster comments, even the pacifist protesting against the war gives homage to those who gave their lives or got wounded in the service to their country. Hardy's poem is, therefore, "no simple protest against time or change or war, but a reflection on the ambiguity of human experience, whether in youth or age, at war or at peace."<sup>9</sup>

The American Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant's "A Song for New Year's Eve" (1859), though unique and uncommon, sounds like Tennyson's "The Death of the Old Year." It looks back to the past year, personified as a generous male being of benign soul, not as one that was full of sorrow and suffering. It was "the good old year/So long companion of our way." Bryant says he should be "grateful" and "mirthful" at this last "golden" hour of the past year, "The kindly year [whose] liberal hands/Have lavished all his store" and when,

Days brightly came and calmly went,

While yet he was our guest;

How cheerfully the week was spent!

How sweet the seventh day's rest!

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<sup>9</sup> [http://yourbrainonbooks.blogspot.com/2011/01/at-entering-of-new-year-by-thomas-hardy\\_01.html](http://yourbrainonbooks.blogspot.com/2011/01/at-entering-of-new-year-by-thomas-hardy_01.html)

At this “tender” hour when the passing year is about to leave with his “last smile,” the poet remembers “the pleasant memories” of those who died last year and wishes the New Year to be as kind. With nostalgia, he is asking his friends to stay “one hour more of jest and song” or one more “little” hour to sing a “parting strain.”

Bryant’s contemporary Helen Hunt Jackson’s “New Year’s Morning” is one of the most inspirational and motivating New Year poems. A prelude to New Year’s Eve, the poem is about “the annoying expression of the ‘old year’ that not only frets over its fate, but is also jealous of the new chances brought by the New Year.” It is futile to fret over what could have been done in the days gone by and it is the same to blame fate for all that may have gone wrong in the course of the last year. Instead, the New Year’s morning is a time for new endeavors. The poem is a reminder of the opportunities that each day as a new day brings along with it, implying that each day is to be lived fully without letting it go by otherwise.

While there is a sense of glitz and glamor about the evenings, which suggest a time of fun and partying with family and friends, especially if it is the New Year’s Eve, mornings are for the new serious efforts and undertakings. As the New Year comes in with new opportunities, there is a chance to make it “big”—successful and productive— all over again. Instead of crying over the spilt milk, as the critic says, the poet encourages humankind to take each day as a new beginning and reach out for the stars. The personified Old Year says:

"The blossoms of the New Year's crown

Bloom from the ashes of the dead...

By all my failures it shall learn.



I have been reckless; it shall be  
Quiet and calm and pure of life.  
I was a slave; it shall go free,  
And find sweet pace where I leave strife."

Referring to the New Year's Eve in particular and every night in general as "the healing balm of sleep," Jackson is wondering how "Only a night from old to new" brings all the changes and miracles:

Each morn is New Year's morn come true,  
Morn of a festival to keep.  
All nights are sacred nights to make  
Confession and resolve and prayer;  
All days are sacred days to wake  
New gladness in the sunny air.  
Only a night from old to new;  
Only a sleep from night to morn.  
The new is but the old come true;  
Each sunrise sees a new year born.

Tennyson's "Ring out, wild bells" foreshadows an equally generalized and fervent farewell to the age-old burden of evil and a lofty call to the new and fresh to take hold as the 1913 Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore welcomes the Bengali New Year *Pohela*

*Boishakh* (1<sup>st</sup> day of the first month of the Bengali calendar, *Boishakh*) in his “Esho hey Boishakh esho esho” (Come, O Boishakh, come, come). Tagore was inspired to write many poems and songs to greet the Bengali New Year, which, unlike the West, heralds amid the great variety of spring colors and various weather patterns, from moderate to warm, hot and humid, sometimes accompanied by strong winds and heavy showers, even storms and cyclones. All these are hinted at by Tagore in the following beautiful New Year lyric, which in a way reads like Shelley’s *West Wind*:

LIKE FRUIT, shaken free by an impatient wind  
from the veils of its mother flower,  
thou comest, New Year, whirling in a frantic dance  
amid the stampede of the wind-lashed clouds  
and infuriate showers,  
while trampled by thy turbulence  
are scattered away the faded and the frail  
in an eddying agony of death.  
Thou art no dreamer afloat on a languorous breeze,  
lingering among the hesitant whisper and hum  
of an uncertain season.  
Thine is a majestic march, o terrible Stranger,  
thundering forth an ominous incantation,  
driving the days on to the perils of a pathless dark,  
where thou carriest a dumb signal in thy banner,

a decree of destiny undeciphered.<sup>10</sup>

India being a large country of colorful cultural, linguistic, and seasonal diversity, there is no single Hindu New Year, although there is the Indian National calendar. Therefore, different parts of the country, such as West Bengal, Gujarat, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Sind, and Central India celebrate the New Year in different ways at different times of the year. In Gujarat, the New Year festival coincides with the Hindu religious festival of Diwali, the festival of (little oil) lamps to welcome Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of riches.

Unlike many poets discussed above, D. H. Lawrence strikes a very personal longing for passionate, sensual love in his “New Year’s Eve” and “New Year’s Night” poems:

Take off your things.  
 Your shoulders, your bruised throat!  
 Your breasts, your nakedness!  
 As the darkness flickers and dips,  
 As the firelight falls and leaps  
 From your feet to your lips!

In consonance with the “animal vibrance” that is there in all his works, Lawrence describes his beloved as a white dove in his arms, “bought at great price” and “worth more than all I’ve got.” The New Year’s night is the time for her innocence, purity, and virginity to be sacrificed through sexual initiation, thereby their mutual “Pride, strength, all the lot” to be yielded. The beloved is actually treated like an object of sacrificial offering in the possession of the lover who, in the

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<sup>10</sup> From *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (Sahityo Akademi, New Delhi: 2004), p. 320.

face of inescapable mortality, intends to put her on the altar of death, “the ancient, inexorable God.” The sudden unexpectedness of death is such that, Lawrence says in the poem, it swoops down on the victim like a falcon. It seems he suggests that it is through an intense sexual experience that time and death can be overcome and overpowered. The similes and images of the dove, sacrifice, the pain of loss, and death, all thought about at the New Year, provide a philosophical perspective and spiritual context for the vigor and warmth of human sexuality taken beyond the realm of physicality in a characteristically Lawrentian way. The two short lyrics manage to explore “a range of emotions, from exhilaration to depression to prophetic brooding.”

The thought of “New Year on Dartmoor” by Sylvia Plath came to her as she, pregnant with her second child, was out for a walk from their (she and Ted Hughes) 11<sup>th</sup> century manor house on the Devon moor with her small (one-and-a-half-year-old) daughter, sometime in late December 1961. It was just over a year before her suicide at the age of thirty in her fragile and then shattering relationship with Hughes. The poem describes the New Year in a highly metaphoric and unrealistic way. The little child in all her innocence is amazed and excited by the “newness” of the icy New Year winter scene. She is overjoyed to see all the ice sparkle over the ordinary (“tawdry”) things around. However, the mother, sadly, knows that all the nearby gleaming and glowing that are there are short lasting and deceiving and that the only truth that lies behind the gaudy glitter is the challenges and hardships that the New Year brings with it.

This is newness: every little tawdry

Obstacle glass-wrapped and peculiar,

Glinting and clinking in a saint's falsetto. Only you

Don't know what to make of the sudden slippiness,  
 The blind, white, awful, inaccessible slant.  
 There's no getting up it by the words you know.  
 No getting up by elephant or wheel or shoe.  
 We have only come to look. You are too new  
 To want the world in a glass hat.

There is a long list of New Year poems and essays to recall on 31 December and 1 January. The above is just a selection from many. Other poems would include “New Year’s Day Nap” by Coleman Barks, “The Old Year” by John Clare, “On a New Year’s Eve” by June Jordan, “The Passing of the Year” and “New Year’s Eve” by Robert W. Service, “A New Year’s Day Poem” by Charles Moir, “A New Year’s Gift” by William Strode, “A New Year’s Resolution to Leave Dundee” by William Topaz McGonagall, “My New Year’s resolution” by Robert Fisher, “New Year Poem” by Barry Tebb, and “New Year’s Chimes” by Francis Thompson. Although the subject is the same, like love and religion, every composition, be it a poem or a piece of prose, is different with different themes and ideas. All are not only interesting but striking as well, suggesting the endless and inexhaustible beauty and variety of the New Year reflections and reactions.

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